Gender Stereotypes Online

Essential Question

What are gender stereotypes, and how can they shape our experiences online?

Lesson Overview

Students are introduced to the concept of gender stereotypes, in both an online and offline context. Students first discuss stereotypes about boys and girls: where they come from, how we learn them, and why they can be restrictive. Students then identify and discuss gender stereotypes in the "Dress Up Your Avatar" feature of a virtual world for kids.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- define gender stereotypes and their impact on people's identities, both online and offline.
- identify gender stereotypes in a virtual world for kids.
- analyze opportunities and limitations for gender expression in virtual worlds.

Materials and Preparation

- Review the **Gender and Digital Life Teacher Backgrounder (Middle School)**.
- Copy the **Dress Up Your Avatar Student Handout**, one for each pair of students.
- Set up students' dummy accounts for the virtual world SecretBuilders, one for each pair of students. Refer to the **Dress Up Your Avatar Student Handout – Teacher Version** for guidance.
- Check with your school about firewalls. You may need to clear the URL for SecretBuilders (www.secretbuilders.com). To learn more about SecretBuilders, read Common Sense Media's review at: www.commonsensemedia.org/website-reviews/secretbuilders.

Family Resources

- Send hom the **Boys, Girls, and Media Messages Family Tip Sheet (Middle & High School)**.

Estimated time: 45 minutes

Standards Alignment –

Common Core:

grade 6: RI.4, RI.7, RI.8, RI.10, W.4, W.10, SL.1a, SL.1b, SL.1c, SL.1d, SL.4, SL.6, L.6

grade 7: RI.4, RI.8, RI.10, W.4, W.10, SL.1a, SL.1b, SL.1c, SL.2, SL.4, SL.6, L.6

grade 8: RI.4, RI.8, RI.10, W.4, W.10, SL.1a, SL.1b, SL.1c, SL.1d, SL.4, SL.6, L.6

NETS·S: 1a-d, 2a-b, 2d, 3a-c, 4a-b, 4d, 5a-d, 6a-b, 6c

Key Vocabulary –

gender: social ideas about what it meawns to be masculine or feminine

**stereotype:** a popular belief about a group of people, based on assumptions that are often extreme and inaccurate

avatar: an image or character that represents a person online

Warm-up *(10 minutes)*

TELL students that you have been invited to a birthday party for 3-year-old twins, Jasmine and Jayden. You need the students' help in brainstorming a list of possible gifts for each child.

INSTRUCT students to spend three minutes writing down some gift ideas. Meanwhile, draw the following Venn diagram on the board:
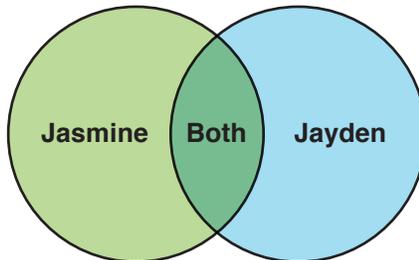
INVITE students to share their gift ideas aloud. Write students' suggestions in their chosen section of the Venn diagram, placing check marks next to any gift ideas that are mentioned multiple times. Alternatively, invite students to create and edit their own Venn diagrams with *LucidChart* (www.lucidchart.com).

SELECT a stereotypical "boy gift" idea for Jayden, like a toy truck. Invite students to discuss whether or not they could give the same gift to Jasmine. Repeat the exercise with a typical "girl gift," like a doll, and encourage students to talk about why they might or might not give this gift to Jayden.

teach 1

What Are Gender Stereotypes *(10 minutes)*

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary terms **gender** and **stereotype**.

EXPLAIN that gender stereotypes, for example, encourage people to think that little girls are sweet and like to dress up as princesses, while boys are rowdy and like to play with trucks. These are common assumptions, but they aren't always true.

DRAW the following gender scale on the board for the class to see:

Feminine   **Masculine**

INVITE volunteers to name different interests, subjects, and activities that teens might pursue – for example, art, math, cooking, sports, and video games. Ask them to say where on the gender scale they would place each activity. Have them explain their choices, and encourage discussion among students who might agree or disagree with the placements.

ENCOURAGE students to discuss whether any of their choices reflect stereotypes about femininity and masculinity. For example, is a boy less masculine if he likes to cook? What about a male chef at a restaurant? Is a girl less feminine if she likes to play video games? What about a female software engineer?

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ASK:

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Why might some people find gender stereotypes limiting?

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Gender stereotypes can encourage very specific ideas about how boys and girls should act. Some people's personalities and interests might match up with gender stereotypes; others' might not. In some cases, gender stereotypes may keep some people from feeling comfortable with who they are, or who they want to be.

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teach 2

Gender Messages in Vitual Worlds *(20 minutes)*

DISCUSS different sources of gender stereotypes. How do we learn about them? Where do we see them? (Encourage students to talk about the media's role in shaping and communicating gender stereotypes. For example, TV shows, songs, movies, and magazines often encourage a limited range of ideas about how guys and girls should look and act.)

POINT OUT that the Internet is a source of media. We may see, and even take part in, communicating gender stereotypes online.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **avatar**.

TELL students that they are going to create avatars for a virtual world. They should keep track of the gender stereotypes they notice along the way. (The activity will prompt them to create two avatars: a "girly girl" and a "manly man." You may wish to define, or brainstorm, the kinds of stereotypes associated with a "girly girl" and a "manly man" before the activity begins, if you think students will need extra guidance.)

DISTRIBUTE the **Dress Up Your Avatar Student Handout**, one for each pair of students.

ALLOW students 10 minutes to complete the activity. Alternatively, you can use the **Dress Up Your Avatar Student Handout – Teacher Version** to guide students through this activity as a whole class.

Note: The "Dress Up Your Avatar" feature of SecretBuilders acts like a gateway into its virtual world. Be sure to remind students not to enter the virtual world without your permission.

HAVE students describe the avatars they created for Assignment #1 on their handouts.

ASK:

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What kinds of stereotypes about girls did you notice in SecretBuilders*?*

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Encourage students to analyze the words they wrote down on their handouts. Many of the "girly" hairstyles, mouths, and clothes in SecretBuilders are associated with being cute, pretty, fashionable, and flirty. Have students discuss where their ideas about "girly girls" come from, and the role that the media plays in shaping these ideas.

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HAVE students describe the avatars they created for Assignment #2 on their handouts.

ASK:

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What kinds of stereotypes about boys did you notice in SecretBuilders*?*

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Students may find that "manly" features on *SecretBuilders* are harder to categorize, but they suggest that boys are more tough, athletic, and laid-back than girls. Some of the masculine hairstyles are labeled "Pro Surfer" or "The Need-A-Haircut." Encourage students to have a discussion about the media's role in shaping our ideas about a "manly man."

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POINT OUT that people don't have to create stereotypical boy or girl avatars in virtual worlds. People can create all sorts of avatars.

ASK:

How might virtual worlds such as SecretBuilders *allow you to challenge, or break free from, gender stereotypes?*	Encourage students to recognize that virtual worlds can allow people to push the boundaries of gender stereotypes. People can experiment with ideas about gender and appearance. For example, a female user could play *SecretBuilders* as a male avatar and see what it's like interacting with other people that way. Also encourage students to think about what their avatar looked like when they were transitioning between Assignment #1 (making their avatar look like a "girly girl") and Assignment #2 (making their avatar look like a "manly man"). In this middle stage, the avatar probably did not reflect gender stereotypes.

closing

Wrap-up *(5 minutes)*

You can use these questions to assess your students' understanding of the lesson objectives. You may want to ask students to reflect in writing on one of the questions, using a journal or an online blog/wiki.

ASK:

What are gender stereotypes, and what do you think about them?	Gender stereotypes are messages that encourage us to think of certain looks, actions, or things as especially "manly" or "girly." Gender stereotypes are often based on more extreme ideas about how boys and girls are supposed to act. Some people might not identify with these ideas, and can feel limited if others assume them to be true.
What role do media, such as virtual worlds, play in shaping gender stereotypes?	Students should recognize that virtual worlds are a form of media – just like television, movies, advertisements, and music. The media aren't solely responsible for creating gender stereotypes, but they certainly can encourage them with images and messages.
In what ways can people break free from gender stereotypes in virtual worlds?	The Internet allows people to experiment with online identities that might be different from their offline identity. Because of this, people might feel that they can break free from traditional gender roles online, especially in virtual worlds.

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4

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Directions

1. Go to *SecretBuilders* (**www.secretbuilders.com**) and log in as a returning player, using an account your teacher created for you.
2. Select any server, and then click "sign in." A window will appear that says "Dress Up Your Avatar."
3. Complete the following assignments with your partner.

Assignment #1 – Create a "Girly Girl"

Create an avatar that you think represents a "girly girl." Document your choices below.

	Name/Description of Your Choice	**Why You Chose It**
Hairstyle		
Eyes		
Mouth		
Clothing (Top)		
Clothing (Legs)		
Other		

What kinds of **stereotypes** about girls does your avatar represent? Think about the words and phrases you wrote in the chart above.

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Assignment #2 – Create a "Manly Man"

Create an avatar that you think represents a "manly man." Document your choices below.

	Name/Description of Your Choice	Why You Chose It
Hairstyle		
Eyes		
Mouth		
Clothing (Top)		
Clothing (Legs)		
Other		

What kinds of **stereotypes** about boys does your avatar represent? Think about the words and phrases you wrote above.

_____

_____

_____

Assignment #3 – What Do You Think?

What do you think about gender stereotypes?

_____

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Gender Stereotypes Online

Setting Up Student Accounts

Create accounts on *SecretBuilders* (**www.secretbuilders.com**), one for each pair of students. You can do this without having to use students' actual email addresses:

1. Register an email address at gmail.com (for example: teacher@gmail.com)

2. When you create accounts on SecretBuilder for your students, use the following system.

   Example: **a.** Account #1: teacher+1@gmail.com

                    b. Account #2: teacher+2@gmail.com

                    c. Account #3: teacher+3@gmail.com

3. Each time you create an account, you will be asked to select an age range, and to choose whether you want to play as a girl or a boy. To keep things consistent for your students, select "girl" for each account you create. (The students later will have an opportunity to transform their avatar into a boy.)

4. Once you see the "Dress Up Your Avatar" activity, quit the site. When students log on to *SecretBuilders* in Teach 2 to design their avatars, the site should automatically direct them to the "Dress Up Your Avatar" activity.

Activity Directions

1. Go to *SecretBuilders* (**www.secretbuilders.com**) and log in as a returning player, using an account your teacher created for you.

2. Select any server, and then click "sign in." A window will appear that says "Dress Up Your Avatar."

3. Complete the following assignments with your partner.

Assignment #1 – Create a "Girly Girl"

Create an avatar that you think represents a "girly girl." Document your choices below.

Below are some examples of answers you can use to guide your students.

	Name/Description of Your Choice	Why You Chose It
Hairstyle	"Updo" Long flowy hair, styled, curls	Because models in magazines and in movies have big, styled hair.
Eyes	"Cutie Eyes" Big eyelashes	It looks like she's wearing lots of mascara or fake eyelashes. When I think of a "girly girl," I think of make-up.
Mouth	"Open Pout" Red, shiny, big lips	Lipstick and full lips are usually associated with women.
Clothing (Top)	"Puffy Sleeves" Button-up shirt with poofy sleeves	Words like "puffy" or "frilly" are usually girly words.
Clothing (Legs)	"Super Ruffle"	Skirts and ruffles are more associated with girls than boys.
Other	Shoes Pink	I gave her pink shoes to match her top. Pink, especially hot pink, is a color associated with girls.

What kinds of **stereotypes** about girls does your avatar represent? Think about the words and phrases you wrote above.

My avatar represents stereotypes of girls as being concerned with primping, make-up, and poofy or frilly clothing. Words like "cutie," "open pout," and "super ruffle" give messages that girls are valued for how they look and for being sweet.

Assignment #2 – Create a "Manly Man"

Create an avatar that you think represents a "manly man." Document your choices below.

	Name/Description of Your Choice	Why You Chose It
Hairstyle	"The Need-A-Haircut" Messy hair	Short hair and buzz cuts are usually associated with a "manly man."
Eyes	"Angry face" Big eyes, staring	A "manly man" is tough and can fight.
Mouth	"Funny Smile" Straight line	Guys are taught not to show emotion. This mouth gives my avatar a serious face.
Clothing (Top)	"Plain White Tee"	A manly man might keep his clothes simple.
Clothing (Legs)	"Blue Striped Sweats"	A manly man would be athletic, but also laid back and chill. Sweatpants fit all of these qualities.
Other	Shoes	I gave him black and red shoes, because those are "boy-ish" colors.

What kinds of **stereotypes** about boys does your avatar represent? Think about the words and phrases you wrote above.

My avatar represents stereotypes of boys as being simple and laid back, but also tough and athletic. Names like "need-a-haircut" and "plain" send a message that boys are relaxed and not concerned with their appearance like girls are. The "angry face" and "funny smile" make my avatar seem like he could fight someone. A stereotypical boy is good at fighting.

Assignment #3 – What Do You Think?

What do you think about gender stereotypes?

Answers will vary. Encourage students to think about how they relate to the different gendered messages that they noticed on SecretBuilders or elswhere in their lives.

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What does gender have to do with digital citizenship and literacy?

In middle school, many young teens become keenly aware of what it means to be popular, and how others perceive them. They not only turn to mass media for hints about how teen girls and boys should look and act, but also to peers online. The problem is that the media often encourages narrow definitions of boys' and girls' roles. Kids may then perpetuate gender stereotypes when using digital media, whether creating avatars in virtual worlds, posting videos and photo albums, texting, or Instant Messaging.

In order to learn how to be responsible and respectful digital media users, young teens must also develop an awareness of the unspoken rules, assumptions, and stereotypes that can inform their behavior. Gender norms — or common social ideas about masculinity and femininity—play a critical role in framing how young teens develop identities, express themselves, and hang out. Kids who do not think critically about gender stereotypes can be misinformed about how the world perceives them and what they can grow up to be.

Why Does It Matter?

Your students are media creators, with the ability to publish content round-the-clock. This ability, combined with constant access to all kinds of media, makes it critically important to teach kids how to recognize and understand gender stereotypes. Adult mentors are well positioned to help young teens develop lifelong media literacy skills—ones that will discourage them from perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

To be upstanding, teens need to crack the gender code. Teens need to think critically about common attitudes that can fuel issues such as digital drama, cyberbullying, and sexting. Quite often, these issues are rooted in social attitudes, not the technology itself.

Not Your Specialty? Not a Problem!

There are more classroom connections than you think. Talking about gender roles can create an easy segue between the subject you regularly teach—whether history, English, or health and wellness—and a class discussion about digital citizenship. Refer to the following page of this backgrounder for tips to help you get started.

Treat students like the experts. Encourage students to feel as though they're teaching you about how they and their friends use digital media, and encourage them to dig deeper into issues by asking lots of questions. They may start the lesson with a certain set of ideas or expectations about "the way things are" online, but then may reevaluate their opinions in the end.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL LIFE: IT'S NOT GENDER NEUTRAL

Every day, more teen girls than teen boys text. In the daily Twitter-verse, there are also more girls than boys, and when it comes to photo posting, it's especially a girl thing…but not always a good thing.

- 77% TEXT DAILY
- 33% EVER TWEETED
- 75% LOVE POSTING PHOTOS

- 60% TEXT DAILY
- 22% EVER TWEETED
- 42% LOVE POSTING PHOTOS

For girls, especially, putting their pictures online can be stressful:

57% girls vs. **28% boys** sometimes feel left out after seeing photos of others together online

45% girls vs. **24% boys** worry about other people posting ugly photos of them online

28% girls vs. **9% boys** have edited photos of themselves before posting

Source: *Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives* (June 26, 2012). A Common Sense Media Research Study. http://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/social-media-social-life

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ALL TEACHERS

Know the difference between *gender* and *sex*. Gender has to do with social identities and roles. Gender is about how a culture defines terms like "masculine," "feminine," and everything in between. One's sex, on the other hand, is a matter of anatomy and biology. For example, when you separate a class into groups of boys and girls, you are separating them by sex, not by gender.

ENGLISH TEACHERS

Imagine characters in books using 21st-century technology. What would Holden Caulfield think of texting? How would digital drama play out between the Montagues and the Capulets? Have students explore how male and female characters' lives would change if they had access to social networks, cell phones, and other forms of digital communication.

HISTORY TEACHERS

Think about gender roles across history and across cultures. Depending on when and where people grow up, expectations about men and women's roles may differ. For example, in the early 20th century, Americans associated the color pink with strength and masculinity, rather than femininity. Have students interview older relatives about how gender roles have changed in the past century, as well as the types of media and technology that they grew up with.

TECHNOLOGY TEACHERS

Explore gender gaps in the fields of science, technology, and math. Fifty-seven percent of girls say that if they went into a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) career, they'd have to work harder than a man just to be taken seriously.[1] Discuss with students where these attitudes come from, and find examples of role models who have challenged the status quo, such as the late Sally Ride.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS TEACHERS

Dive deeper into media messages. The Internet allows us to access media anytime, anywhere. Explore messages about boys and girls in your students' favorite magazines, songs, movies, and TV shows. For example, you can use documentary films such as *MissRepresentation* and *The Mask You Live In*, as well as those offered by the Media Education Foundation, to spark class discussion about gender representations in the media.

1 "Generation STEM: What Girls Say about Science, Technology, and Math." Girl Scouts of the USA (2012).

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2

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1. What does the word "gender" mean?

    a) The character that someone plays in a virtual world or video game

    b) Common ideas about how boys and girls should look and act

    c) Biological differences between boys and girls

2. Who do you think created this avatar?

    a) A boy

    b) A girl

    c) Either a boy or a girl

Explain your answer:

3. Princess Peach is the only girl in the video game *Super Mario Bros*. The purpose of the game is to save Princess Peach.

What *stereotypes* about girls does Princess Peach represent?

Princess Peach

Image Sources:
MarioWiki. Web. 16 Oct. 2012.<http://mario.wikia.com/wiki/Princess_Peach>
SecretBuilders. Web. 14 Jan. 2013. <www.secretbuilders.com>

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1

Gender Stereotypes Online

1. What does the word "gender" mean?

a) The character that someone plays in a virtual world or video game

b) Common ideas about how boys and girls should look and act

c) Biological differences between boys and girls

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **b**. Gender has to do with social identities and roles. Sex, on the other hand, is a matter of anatomy and biology.

2. Who do you think created this avatar?

a) A boy

b) A girl

c) Either a boy or a girl

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **c**. In virtual worlds, people can experiment with the avatars they create. There are no rules that say boys and girls have to look or act like their avatars.

3. Princess Peach is the only girl in the video game *Super Mario Bros*. The purpose of the game is to save Princess Peach.

What *stereotypes* about girls does Princess Peach represent?

Answer feedback
Princess Peach represents the stereotype that girls are more helpless than boys. Her character has long blond hair, blue eyes, and wears a pink dress, which are also stereotypes associated with girls.

Princess Peach

Image Sources: *MarioWiki*. Web. 16 Oct. 2012.<http://mario.wikia.com/wiki/Princess_Peach>
         SecretBuilders. Web. 14 Jan. 2013. <www.secretbuilders.com>

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1